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Sent: Wed 12/23/2009 8:35:00 PM
Subject: Media Outreach: Feds release new plan to revive California delta
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FYI - Here are today's news articles on the Bay-Delta plan, as pulled together by our press office.
Sent by EPA Wireless E-Mail Services

From: Mary Simms
Sent: 12/23/2009 11:57 AM PST
To: Alexis Strauss; Karen Schwinn; Bruce Herbold; Kathleen Johnson; Julie Anderson; Laura Yoshii; Patti TenBrook; Pam Cooper; Brent Maier; Jim Vreeland; Teddy Ryerson
Subject: Media Outreach: Feds release new plan to revive California delta

AP: Feds release new plan to revive Californiadelta

By GARANCE BURKE (AP) – 3 hours ago

FRESNO, Calif. — Senior Obama administration officials released a new action plan Tuesday aimed at bolstering the federal government's role in solving California's water crisis and restoring the vast freshwater estuary that provides drinking water to millions of households.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said six federal agencies would make it a top priority to study the factors harming fish, boost water deliveries to cities and croplands and supply drought aid to farmers.

The collapse of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta has caused native fish species to plummet, and a three-year drought coupled with restrictions on water deliveries have led to unemployment and economic distress in the state's farm belt and fisheries.

"The Californiawater crisis is a full-blown crisis that requires all hands on deck to help those who are suffering," Salazar said. "We are moving aggressively to do our part."

In September, Salazar held a hearing about the state's water woes in Washington, where federal officials pledged to address the ongoing shortages and come up with an interim plan focused on the region's most pressing environmental and water supply problems.

The six agencies will coordinate with state authorities to restore the ecosystem — considered one of the most vital wildlife habitats on the West Coast — and speed the flow of water through state and federal canals south of the delta, officials said.

They also will support efforts to overhaul the state's antiquated water system as laid out in a \$11.1 billion package of water bills passed by the state legislature last month. Now that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has signed the legislation, the bond measure to fund it will go before voters in November for final approval.

In recent years, legal battles over dwindling supplies have interrupted and reduced irrigation flows to the fertile San Joaquin Valley and Southern California homes, once federal officials determined that the giant pumps sending water south were grinding up native fish.

As part of the new plan, the Environmental Protection Agency will study other factors that also may be harming the ecosystem, including invasive species, sewage overflows and degraded wildlife habitat.

"There are no shortage of stressors out there," EPA fish biologist Bruce Herbold said. "Farming communities near the delta use hundreds of chemicals, and Stockton and Sacramento are two of the fastest-growing cities, so we want to look at all those potential pollutants and find out what's actually affecting the fish."

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5g3dGm4ERH7MBw69suqcXcfqDAvpAD9CP3JL82>

Contra Costa Times: Obama Administration releases Delta plan

By Mike Taugher Contra Costa Times

In response to California's water crisis, the Obama administration says it will delay a plan to install gates in Delta channels meant to increase water supplies but push forward with a plan to build a new fish hatchery in Rio Vista to keep alive fish populations at risk of extinction.

The administration's 23-page interim plan, released Tuesday, pledges better cooperation between the state and federal governments. It lays out a number of projects that it says will help ease the conflict between the need for water supplies statewide and the declining Delta environment until a more permanent solution is found.

Among the proposals:

Build a connector to link state and federal canals south of Tracy to facilitate water sales and increase flexibility in water deliveries.

Delay plans to build the "Two Gates" project that some water agencies were hoping would increase water deliveries this year. Instead, the administration said that further studies will be done to see if the project will work and whether it will be cost effective.

Intensify the investigation and response to industrial pollution, pesticides, sewer discharges and other environmental threats to the Delta to determine how they are contributing to the environmental crisis.

Install protective fish screens in several key spots, including a \$30 million screen at the Contra Costa Water District's Rock Slough intake, where the district now gets about 20 percent of its water.

Sequester carbon and restore wetlands habitat in key areas of the watershed.

Several of the measures were suggested by the Contra Costa Water District three years ago, but most were never implemented, said Greg Gartrell, the district's assistant general manager.

"The long-term (solution) is going to take a long time, so you have to do these immediate actions or you're going to end up in a bad place," he said. "That's where we ended up."

The fish hatchery for Delta smelt and possibly other imperiled fish is planned in Rio Vista, where the city owns former Army base property that might be used for the purpose.

The site would be used to produce fish for research and maintain stocks of species in case they go extinct or are further threatened.

Among the fish species that might be raised there are Delta smelt, longfin smelt, Sacramento splittail, green sturgeon and others.

"We want the ability to expand to produce large numbers of fish should it become necessary to supplement the wild population," said Bob Clarke, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's regional acting fisheries program manager.

Water users in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California and their congressional allies were pushing for the "Two Gates" project this year. The idea was to submerge gates that can be opened and closed in the Delta to control the turbidity in the water.

Delta smelt are thought to stay in murkier water, and if the gates could keep the water near Delta pumps clear, water agencies thought they could get more water out without killing nearby fish.

"One way or another, we will be putting in gates in the Delta, not just to manage turbidity, but over the long run to manage flows, water quality and, I suspect, as a hedge against future island failures and sea level rise," said Jeff Mount, a UC Davis geologist. "But it looks like Interior has made the decision to wait until the science that's behind the smelt-turbidity hypothesis is better formed."

http://www.contracostatimes.com/bay-area-news/ci_14051187?nclink_check=1

Sacramento Bee: Feds take on bigger role in Delta protection

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta stands to draw a lot more attention from the federal government in 2010 under an "action plan" released Tuesday by the U.S. Department of Interior.

The plan is the result of a September agreement among federal agencies to help California deal with water problems and environmental decline in the Delta.

The plan promises to reverse years of neglect the Delta suffered during the Bush administration, when the federal government failed to meet funding and resource commitments in a number of important partnerships with the state.

"It's a pretty significant demonstration of the Obama administration's commitment to the Bay-Delta and to California," said Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes. "It underscores the fact that the feds are going to be full partners with the state."

The Delta, the largest estuary on the west coast of the Americas, is the hub of a water supply system that serves 25 million Californians.

The federal government plays a pivotal role in the system. It operates some of California's largest reservoirs, including Folsom Dam, and one of two pumping and canal systems that divert millions of acre-feet of Delta water annually. This thirst has contributed to water shortages, pollution and steep declines in numerous fish species, including Delta smelt and chinook salmon.

On Tuesday, though, some critics saw little new or significant in the federal plan.

Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, said the plan is largely a summary of actions already under way or a restatement of existing federal authorities.

The problem, he said, is that existing law hasn't been fully enforced over the past two decades to protect the Delta.

"It's the same broad, hopeful language we've seen over last 15 years that shepherded the collapse of this estuary," Jennings said. "This doesn't do much for fish, but it does a lot for water exporters."

Among other things in the plan unveiled Tuesday, the federal government commits to:

- Build a link between existing state and federal Delta canal systems – and overhaul rules that govern how their water can be used – so customers on the two canals can share water.
- Have the Environmental Protection Agency propose new pesticide regulations in the Delta, and propose a cleaning or inspection program for recreational boats in the Delta to control the spread of invasive species.
- Study how threatened Delta smelt respond to turbid, or cloudy, water to decide whether to build water-control gates to manage turbidity.
- Increase federal assistance for farmers affected by the drought, including water conservation incentives, and investigate carbon sequestration on Delta islands.

- More resources to the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a process to improve plumbing and habitat in the estuary. The plan includes a proposed canal or tunnel to divert Sacramento Riverwater out of the estuary.

Hayes said the federal government still has not taken a position on the controversial canal.

"We can't and we won't until the analysis gets completed," he said.

Lester Snow, director of the California Department of Water Resources, praised the federal government for recognizing "a historic window of opportunity" to address the Delta's problems.

"It signals the strong commitment of federal agencies to resolve California's pressing water challenges," Snow said.

Jonas Minton, senior project manager at the Planning and Conservation League, questioned why the federal plan does not include installing modern fish screens on existing Delta pumps.

Small screens designed to work at low flows would cost about \$120 million, he said, and could allow 100,000 acre-feet of water to be pumped from the Delta during spring, when fish protections otherwise restrict pumping.

Instead, he noted, the federal government has spent \$40 million to subsidize new wells in the San Joaquin Valley, where groundwater aquifers are already overdrawn.

"We are pleased the federal government is re-engaging in California water," Minton said.

"However, they need to be careful not to make the problem worse."

<http://www.sacbee.com/capitolandcalifornia/story/2416096.html>

StocktonRecord: Government to help restore Delta vitality

The Obama administration on Tuesday released a list of near-term actions to relieve the hardships of drought and revive the dying Delta.

The 23-page report is the latest in a series of promises from the federal government to wade into California's water problems after "several years of being on the sidelines."

The crisis "requires all hands on deck to help those who are suffering," U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said in a written statement. "We are moving aggressively to do our part to address the urgent need to provide reliable water supplies for 25 million Californians, while also protecting the Bay-Delta ecosystem upon which the supplies depend."

The document focuses on fixes that can improve the water supply as soon as 2010; it is silent on the long-term question of a peripheral canal, although it pledges more participation in the development of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, of which some kind of canal or tunnel is a key element.

Among the strategies laid out in Tuesday's plan:

Speedy approval of a plan to tie together the California Aqueduct and Delta Mendota

Canal south of Tracy, which would allow more flexibility to export water from the Delta.

Construction is expected to be finished by October 2011.

More flexibility for water transfers.

Expedited study of the "Two Gates" project, the proposed installation of barriers in the south Delta to direct threatened fish away from the pumps.

Assistance for the National Academy of Sciences, which announced last week that it has started its own review of new rules that protect Delta fish but restrict the state's water supply.

Study of the other factors that harm the Delta's environment, such as pesticides, stormwater runoff, treated wastewater and mercury.

The state Department of Water Resources praised Tuesday's report, as did the

Environmental Defense Fund, one of several conservation groups working on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan.

http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091223/A_NEWS/912230309#STS=g3kigqq9.gq5

Environmental News Service: Federal Agencies Plan to Ease Water Crisis in California Bay-Delta

WASHINGTON, DC, December 22, 2009 (ENS) - To address the water crisis in California, the Obama administration today released a coordinated interim action plan that involves six federal agencies.

The plan is undertaken in accordance with a Memo of Understanding signed at the end of September by six federal agencies - the Departments of the Interior, Commerce, Agriculture and the Army as well as the U.S. EPA and the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

"The Californiawater crisis is a full-blown crisis that requires all hands on deck to help those who are suffering," said Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today. "We are moving aggressively to do our part to address the urgent need to provide reliable water supplies for 25 million Californians, while also protecting the Bay-Delta ecosystem upon which the supplies depend."

The administration is giving priority attention to these issues because the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta-San Francisco Bay Estuary, commonly called the Bay-Delta, is among the most important estuary ecosystems in the nation, the administration says in its action plan.

The Bay-Delta is the hub of the nation's largest water delivery system, providing drinking water to 25 million Californians. The ecosystem sustains about \$400 billion of annual economic activity, including a \$28 billion agricultural industry and many recreational opportunities.

But the Bay-Delta ecosystem is now in crisis. After decades of steep and steady decline, the ecosystem has reached a point of collapse, with some imperiled fish species at all-time low population levels and threats from climate change and associated sea-level rise, seismic risks, and other stressors - such as pesticides, pollutant discharges, and invasive species - underscoring the system's vulnerability.

For the past three years, Californiahas suffered drought and the annual reservoir recharge has been only one-half to two-thirds of average. Now, water supply managers are facing a possible fourth dry year with low reservoir levels, and both agricultural and urban water customers are being asked to reduce water use yet again.

The Bay-Delta is inhabited by 55 species of fish and 750 species of plants and wildlife. Until recently, it supported a thriving commercial and recreational fishing industry that normally contributes hundreds of millions of dollars annually to the Californiaeconomy.

Drought on top of decades of environmental degradation of the Bay-Delta have closed the commercial salmon fishery. State officials estimate that the fishery closure in 2009 caused the loss of 2,690 jobs and led to an economic loss of \$279 million.

The coordinated federal action plan announced today is intended to promote smarter water supply and use by constructing projects that increase flexibility in the water supply system; enhancing water transfers; and ensuring that the best science is applied to water supply decisions.

The plan calls for intensifying and aligning federal water conservation efforts with those of the state. Federal agencies will be more involved in the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, an effort currently underway to address critical long-term water issues in California.

"Everything we do will be done in close partnership with the state of California and will build upon the path-breaking legislation recently enacted by the state," Secretary Salazar said.

The Obama administration plans to advance ecosystem restoration projects, including near-term habitat projects in the Bay-Delta to accelerate the restoration and propagation of Delta smelt and other aquatic species and to address climate change impacts on the Bay-Delta.

"The Obama administration is committed to robust re-engagement in restoring the Bay-Delta ecosystem and addressing California's water needs," said Nancy Sutley, who chairs the White House Council on Environmental Quality. "The actions that federal agencies announced today will have real, on-the-ground impacts in 2010 and will complement the state of California's ongoing response."

The plan calls for federal agencies to help deliver drought relief services and ensure integrated flood risk management, including the prioritization of projects and activities for flood risk management and related levee stabilization projects and navigation.

Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes said the plan will be updated as needed. "This plan was produced on an expedited basis due to the crisis, and it will remain a living document that is updated and revised on a going-forward basis."

At the same time, the National Research Council has begun a two-year review of the scientific basis of actions to achieve both an environmentally sustainable California Bay-Delta and a reliable water supply, at the request of Congress and the U.S. departments of the Interior and Commerce.

To help shape near-term decisions and also provide an integrated, long-term view of water and environmental management in the Bay-Delta ecosystem, the Research Council will issue two reports.

The first report will focus on scientific questions, assumptions, and conclusions that underlie water management options in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Biological Opinion on coordinated operations of the Central Valley

Project and State Water Project.

The first report will also focus on the National Marine Fisheries Service's Biological Opinion on the Long-Term Central Valley Project and State Water Project Operations Criteria and Plan.

The committee will assess "reasonable and prudent alternatives" that would have less impact on other water uses compared with those in the biological opinions, and would provide equal or greater protection for the fish species and their designated critical habitat covered in these opinions.

The committee will consider options that might avoid assisting one federally listed threatened or endangered species while negatively impacting another.

In the fall of 2011, the committee will issue a second report on how to best incorporate science and adaptive management concepts into programs for the management and restoration of the Bay-Delta.

The 15 member committee includes scientific experts in water-related specialties from around the country. It will be chaired by Dr. Robert Huggett, an independent consultant and professor emeritus and former chair of the Department of Environmental Sciences, Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences at the College of William and Mary, where he was on the faculty for over 20 years. He is an expert in aquatic biogeochemistry and ecosystem management.

The committee's first meeting, which will include public comment sessions, is scheduled for January 24-28 at the University of California, Davis.

<http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/dec2009/2009-12-22-093.asp>

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